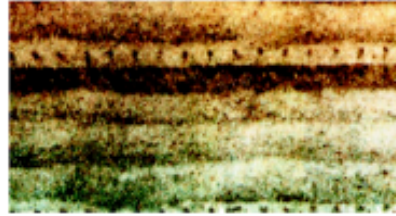


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## Closures

It is said that there is no such thing as great old wine – just great old bottles. Why should this be so? Clearly, if there is a great old bottle, the other (not great) bottles of the same wine originally had the potential to be great but something happened along the way. What happened, I suggest, is that the closure (in this case the cork) failed to keep the air out and oxidation occurred producing tired, brown wine lacking in fruit or fruit derived flavours and aromas.

It is easy to become sceptical about the notion of great old bottles, because they are so rare. My scepticism was destroyed one day in September, 1995 in Burgundy when Jill and I tasted and then consumed with our lunch a bottle of 1955 Domain Henry Gouge “Les St. George”. This 40 year old Burgundy, made of course from Pinot Noir, was vibrant and fresh and yet unlike a young wine – a silky, complex, intriguing and entirely delicious wine quite unlike the tired old things I had despaired over from my cellar.

Maybe this is being a little simplistic, but I believe that this beautiful wine had aged like this mainly because the cork had worked, stopping the air from getting in. No doubt the fact that the wine had lain undisturbed in its cool cellar in Burgundy since being bottled in 1956 or 1957 helped the cork and the wine.

Natural cork is a wonderful thing, and when first used as a closure for wine bottles was no doubt by far the best option available. We love cork. We love the ceremony of pulling out the cork and the sound it makes when it comes out of the bottle. But we hate some of the things cork does to our wine. Chemical spoilage of wine by its cork due to trichloranisol (TCA) is more common, we believe, than the cork suppliers tell us. The better we know the wine, the more we see. The incidence is unacceptable and the consequences for us as producers are dire. Not only do we have to replace corked bottles but we know that many consumers who experience a corked bottle of our wine have no idea what is wrong with it, blaming the producer and swearing never to buy the wine again.

There is a closure, fully tried and tested over many years which, if applied correctly and not damaged, overcomes the problems of natural cork. This is the screwcap, often referred to as the Stelvin closure. (Stelvin is the brand name given to the original French designed product). Thanks to brave producers in the Clare valley and in New Zealand, in particular, the image of the screwcap as a closure suitable only for low priced wines has been turned around. More and more producers are now using the screwcap closure with growing confidence that consumers not only accept them but seek them out as indicative of a reliably high quality product.

We have decided to bottle all our wine under screwcap from now on. If we live long enough I am confident that we will be enjoying many more great old bottles as a result. These should become the rule rather than the exception, as long as we store the wine in suitable, cool, dark cellars. It will be sad in many ways if the natural cork closure disappears, but I can live with that if in exchange we enjoy reliably fresh, clean delicious young wines which can evolve over years in a reductive environment into the sort of wine we enjoyed in Burgundy in 1995.

Richard.